

Session 1: Knowing God

Taught by Colin Smith

One of the key qualifications for any Christian leader is that you have a good grasp of the main teachings or doctrines of the Bible.

When Paul wrote to Timothy about leadership, he gave three priorities: watch your life; watch your doctrine; and stir up the gift that is in you (2 Timothy 1:6, 1 Timothy 4:14).

📖 *“Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching.”*
1 Timothy 4:16 ESV

📖 *“Watch your life and doctrine closely.”*
1 Timothy 4:16 NIV

Our leadership training modules have three focal points:

- 1. Life** – keep a close watch on yourself.
- 2. Doctrine** – keep a close watch on your teaching.
- 3. Skills** – Paul says to Timothy, “do not neglect the gift that you have been given.”

Notice that Paul says here, *“Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress”* (1 Timothy 4:15). I’m so glad that Paul uses the word ‘progress,’ and not perfection! The greatest blessing you can bring to the people you lead is to make progress in your pursuit of godliness, in your grasp of truth, and in the cultivation of your gifts.

If the people you lead see growth in you, they will be encouraged because if you can make progress, so can they. If you haven’t done the module on Watch Your Life, I commend that to you. Read the qualifications for leaders in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 and you will see that they all boil down to character and competence. Character is clearly the first emphasis. The elder should be above reproach, self-controlled, gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money (1 Timothy 3:2–3).

“Watch your life” comes first. That’s why we have a whole module on what it means to live a godly life, to fight sin, to exercise faith, and to discern God’s will. But Paul also says that we must watch our doctrine. An elder must, *“hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it”* (Titus 1:9).

Paul makes a similar statement in regard to deacons. *“They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience”* (1 Timothy 3:9). Later Paul tells Timothy what it looks like to *“...be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed”* (1 Timothy 4:6).

That’s the focus of this module. The aim is to help you get a good grasp of some basic doctrines of the Christian faith so that you will be able to lead and serve others. This word “doctrine” simply means teaching. God has spoken to us over hundreds of years. He did this through prophets and apostles, and supremely through our Lord Jesus Christ.

What has God said? Doctrine gathers together what God has said in Scripture, and the place to begin is with three foundational questions that form the framework for this module:

- 1. Who is God?**
- 2. What is the human problem?**
- 3. What has God done about it?**

In this module, we’re going to look at what we believe about God, what we believe about ourselves, and what we believe about the salvation God has accomplished in Jesus Christ. We begin today with Isaiah 6 that addresses all three of these questions. Isaiah 6 is a key passage of Scripture for every Christian leader. Here’s why. Isaiah says, *“I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me”* (Isaiah 6:8).

That’s where you want to be. You want to be a leader who is available, and useful in the service of God. You want God to commission you, to send you. You want to be in a place where you are ready and eager to go. And the question is how do you get to Isaiah 6:8? The answer is in verses 1 through 7. Three things brought Isaiah to the place of saying, “Here I am! Send me.”

1. Gripped by God's glory

📖 *"In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord..." Isaiah 6:1*

Isaiah spoke the word of the LORD during the reigns of four kings – Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (Isaiah 1:1) So Isaiah had already been speaking the Word of God for some time when king Uzziah died. That's why this story is recorded in Isaiah chapter 6 and not in Isaiah 1.

Isaiah was already a well-known preacher when the events he describes here took place. I expect he would have been well appreciated and perhaps even celebrated for his marvellous ministry. If he was around today, people would crowd into conferences to hear him speak. Millions would follow his oracles on Twitter/X!

Isaiah was a godly leader, but here he tells us of an experience that happened during his ministry that marked him and shaped him for the rest of his life. *"In the year that king Uzziah died, I saw the Lord..." You read a statement like that, and it makes you ask, "What did he see?"* Isaiah tells us. *"I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple."* We wait for more, but that's all that Isaiah can say.

Notice Isaiah was not able to look at God directly. He saw what was beneath the Lord—the throne and the train of God's robe filling the temple. He was able to see what was above the Lord – *"Above him stood the seraphim"* (verse 2).

You find something similar in the story of Moses. When Moses and Aaron saw the glory of the LORD we read, *"...they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness"* (Exodus 24:10). Notice that they could not look directly at the brightness of God's glory. They could only describe the brightness of what lay beneath God's feet.

You find the same thing when John sees a vision of the glory of God in the book of Revelation. He says, *"...his face was like the sun shining in full strength"* (Revelation 1:16). You can't look directly at the sun shining in all its brilliance, of course. John is telling us that he could not look into the face of the risen Lord Jesus because of the sheer brightness of His glory. And then he adds, *"When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead"* (Revelation 1:17).

Isaiah has a similar experience here. He is telling us that God revealed His glory, but Isaiah could not look at God's face. *"All I can tell you is that He was high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple."*

The temple was a vast building. But the whole place could scarcely contain the end of God's robe!

Then Isaiah heard angelic creatures called seraphim calling out to one another. *"Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew."* Why would the seraphim cover their faces, and their feet? These angels hadn't sinned as we have. They have nothing to be ashamed of. Their whole lives are spent in obedience to God. The angels cover their faces because they are creatures, over-awed in the presence of their Creator.

If you were to live the most perfect life in history, and then entered the presence of God, you would still shrink back in awe and wonder as a creature before the glory of your Creator. That's how it is even for the holy angels in the presence of God. *"And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!'"* (Isaiah 6:3).

If we want to give emphasis to a statement we can underline it, put it in italics, or use a bold typeface. In the Hebrew language, if you wanted to give something special emphasis, you would say it twice. For example, our Lord Jesus would often say, *"Truly, truly I say to you"* (John 3:3, 5).

But this is the only occasion in the whole of the Bible where something is stated three times: *"Holy, holy, holy."* There is never a time when the Bible says that God is "wrath, wrath, wrath" or "love, love, love" or "power, power, power." But here we are told that God is "Holy, holy, holy." Holiness is so foundational to who God is that if we do not grasp His holiness, we do not know Him as He is.

What is holiness? That's rather like asking the question, what is fire? The best way to understand fire is to observe its effect. Watch the effect that fire has on what it touches, and you will have

some understanding of the awesome thing that it is. Isaiah tells us the effects of God's holy presence: *"And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke"* (Isaiah 6:4).

This must have been absolutely terrifying to Isaiah. The temple was as solid and substantial as anything on earth could be and it shook, violently, as if in an earthquake. And suddenly, having glimpsed something of the glory of God, Isaiah was plunged into thick darkness as the whole of the temple was filled with smoke. This is the God that we serve. And if we would be useful to God as leaders in His church, we need to be gripped by a profound awareness of His glory.

Listen to these words from A.W. Tozer:

What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us... Were we able to extract from any man a complete answer to the question, 'What comes into your mind when you think about God?' we might predict with certainty the spiritual future of that man. Were we able to know exactly what our most influential religious leaders think of God today, we might be able with some precision to foretell where the Church will stand tomorrow.

- **A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy***

Now think about that. You are a leader. You have influence and your spiritual future and the future of those you lead will be shaped by the degree to which you grasp the glory of God!

Tozer goes on to say,

It is my opinion that the Christian conception of God current in these middle years of the twentieth century is so decadent as to be utterly beneath the dignity of the Most High God and actually to constitute for professed believers something amounting to a moral calamity.

- **A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy***

In another place, Tozer says,

A widespread revival of the kind of Christianity we know today in America might prove to be a moral tragedy from which we would not recover in a hundred years.

- ***Leaning into the Wind***

Tozer was writing toward the end of the 1950's and he's saying that the view of God that had become prevalent was flippant, lightweight, decadent and that if that kind of Christianity were to grow it would end up bringing a moral calamity. If you look back at the latter part of the 20th century and the first decades of the 21st century, what has happened in large measure is what Tozer feared. Large numbers of people have professed some form of faith in Jesus. But there has been little of the fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom.

We hear about a leader caught in some financial or sexual scandal and we say, 'How can this be?' If, as leaders, we don't have a sense of the greatness and glory of God to whom we must give an account, if we don't fear the Lord, if we don't have a profound awareness that we live every day under the all-seeing eye of God who knows everything we think and say and do... we may do more damage to the church than good.

This is why leaders must begin with knowing God. Isaiah had been in ministry for some years. He'd been speaking powerfully. His platform had expanded, and his influence had increased. God brought him to a place where again, he was gripped by an overwhelming sense of the glory of the God that he served.

That's the first thing that I'm praying for you as we begin this module. That you will have an overwhelming sense of the glory of the God you serve. That your love for Him will cause you to fear Him, and that your fear for Him will cause you to love Him.

2. Humbled by Your Need

📖 *And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"* **Isaiah 6:5**

Notice the effect of seeing God's glory. When Isaiah got a heightened view of the greatness and glory of God, he had a humbled view of himself. These two things always go together. The more we grasp His greatness and glory, the more humble we will become.

I am fascinated by Isaiah's words here: *"I am a man of unclean lips."* Isaiah's lips were the tools of his ministry. He was a preacher of the Word of God. Speaking was his spiritual gift, and it would have been so easy for Isaiah to use that gift to promote himself. Sin lurked not only in the dark corners of his life, but even in his greatest gift! In the presence of God, Isaiah felt that even his greatest gift had to be cleansed.

We can see that the cleansing blood of Jesus needs to be applied to our areas of greatest weakness. What we sometimes don't see is that the cleansing blood of Jesus needs to be applied to our areas of greatest strength.

Then Isaiah says, *"I dwell among a people of unclean lips."* When Isaiah saw the glory of the Lord, he saw that the world around him was in desperate need. 'I live in a world that is defiled by every kind of sin.' Then Isaiah says, *"Woe is me! For I am lost."* Literally this means, "I am undone. I have fallen apart. My whole being has been unravelled." Isaiah was a man who walked with God. He spoke the Word of God. He was a godly leader. But God brought him into a fresh awareness of his own sin.

Leaders who are useful in the service of God are humble because they know their own need. There's no swagger about them. There is no

promoting of self. The more you are gripped by the glory of God, the more you will feel your own need. If God intends to use you, He will bring you there, but He will never leave you there. So how do you move forward?

3. Compelled by God's Grace

📖 *Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for." **Isaiah 6:6-7***

Notice what happens next. The temple had filled with smoke as the seraph announced the holiness of God. Isaiah is sitting in utter darkness. He is conscious of the presence of God, He is conscious of his own hidden sins, but God is hidden from his view. Then, as Isaiah peers into the smoke, it seems as if one of the angels is coming toward him. Coming from the altar where the fire that consumed the sacrifices was always burning. The angel picks up a burning coal from the altar, and now sweeps over toward Isaiah, and the burning coal is pressed onto Isaiah's lips.

Do you see what is happening here? The altar was the place where the sacrifice of atonement was made. And now the effect of that atonement is applied to the area of Isaiah's life where he was most conscious of his own sin. He had said, *"I am a man of unclean lips."* The angel of God says, *"See this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."*

Think about this: The atonement touches the area of your worst sin! You may be thinking as we begin this module, 'I don't know that I'm the kind of person that God can use. There are sins that have repeatedly pulled me down.' What I want you to see is that the Lord Jesus Christ died for your sin, especially the sin that is most on your mind and on your conscience. God by His grace takes the sacrifice of Jesus and applies it to the place in your life where you are most aware of your own sin, and most ashamed of your repeated failure.

Now do you see the significance of this? We're asking the question; how do you get to Isaiah 6:8? How do you get to the place of being able to say, "Lord, here I am, send me?" The way to get to "Here am I, send me" is to be gripped by the glory of God, to be humbled by your own continuing need, and to be compelled by the grace of God that has touched your life.

What is it that brings you the greatest sense of guilt and shame? God applies the atonement made by Jesus there. “This has touched you. Your guilt is taken away. Your sin atoned for.” And then Isaiah says, I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “*Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?*” *Then I said, “Here I am! Send me”* (Isaiah 6:8).

My prayer for this module is that God would use these sessions to do in your heart what He did for Isaiah the prophet. That you too would be gripped by God’s glory, that you will be humbled by your own continuing need, that you will be compelled by God’s marvellous grace, and that you will be brought to a place of saying before God, “Here I am, send me.”

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